

University of Dundee

Editorial - green letters special issue

Tarbuck, Alice; Widger, Eleanore

Published in:
Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism (Green Letters)

DOI:
[10.1080/14688417.2017.1389652](https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2017.1389652)

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Tarbuck, A., & Widger, E. (2018). Editorial - green letters special issue: traversing the field. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism (Green Letters)*, 21(3), 237-245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2017.1389652>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Green Letters Special Issue: Traversing the Field

Editorial

Alice Tarbuck and Eleanore Widger

to walk
to trek
to hike
to yomp

to amble
to ramble
to womble
to wander

(to slither
 both hither
 and thither)

to march
to mince
to trudge
to traipse

to stroll
to stride
to stomp
to STOP

Pumff. A foot is dolloped onto the ground. In under a second it is load-bearing, locking in place to become a willing pivot for the body as a whole. It accepts the load dutifully, bending a little at the knee in a small act of genuflection. Above it, a roll of the hips tells the trailing leg to scramble and it responds by hoisting itself aloft and catapulting its cargo (the other foot) forwards. This foot reaches out and finds land. Pumff. Then it too locks in place and takes the weight of its owner before silently passing the centre of gravity back to its counterpart like an Olympic torch made of physics.

This transaction is repeated, back and forth, back and forth, and it's soon clear that this tandem act is propelling the whole unit forwards in fluid locomotion.

What I've just described might sound complex, but it's not a newly invented dance or a corporate team-building activity, it's something we all do every single day. Give up?

I'm talking . . . about *walking*.¹

An overblown sketch of the mechanics of bipedalism; a poetic list of synonyms for walking, invoking its many cultural performances; a presumptuous claim to universality – these excerpts

from the opening of Steve Coogan's *Alan Partridge: Nomad*, parody the current moment's apparent obsession with walking, and the ways in which it is treated both in and out of the academy. Recognising walking's research currency, as well as its representation in myriad television programmes and popular books on the transformative potential of long walks in particular, Coogan takes the scholarly attention currently lent to walking and transforms it into pedantic Partridgean earnestness. Faced with such a caricature, a few reservations about the novelty of our research, which in various ways touches on phenomenology and the poetics of walking, might be forgiven. Not generally recognised for occupying the cutting-edge, Alan Partridge's address to walking perhaps indicates a certain fatigue with the subject in the cultural imagination. On the other hand, as his deliberate overemphasis of the notion that, 'we all walk. All of us' (footnoted 'with some obvious exceptions'), suggests, there may yet be much to explore in our cultural dealings with, and representations of, walking.² Walking is most often 'humdrum' – simply one of many ways of getting from place to place – but occasionally demands a particular style of performance which offers insights into wider cultural constructions, for example, 'walking down a church aisle, to give away a daughter at her wedding or bear a pall at a funeral'; 'Our walks are as unique as we are – from the pert strut of a Strictly Come Dancer to the no-nonsense galumph of a Tory lady politician'.³ Certainly, as the enthusiasm and variety of discussions which took place at *Traversing the Field* demonstrate, walking continues to provide a rich and compelling topic of investigation – walking as 'sign'; artistic practice; research method; mode of ecological engagement; physical and mental exercise, and, as Helen List points out in her article for this issue, as 'necessary labour' and 'inexpensive recreation'.

As mentioned, this special issue comes out of *Traversing the Field: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Walking in Scottish Landscapes*, held at the University of Dundee on 30th April 2016. With a short extract from Thomas A. Clark's *In Praise of Walking* as prompt and provocation, the call for papers invited participants to consider links between landscape, walking and thinking, and to deconstruct as well as celebrate its application in their respective disciplines. On the day, walking was revealed to have the potential to unlock new perspectives across disciplines, history borrowing methodologies from archaeology, ethnography from mental health care, philosophy from dance, and so on. Evidently, many speakers had found themselves literally crossing fields in order to cross disciplinary fields. Indeed, most participants were clearly primarily motivated to attend by their love of walking, by the fact that it seems to offer a pleasurable and productive mode of enquiry into discipline-specific questions, and to facilitate expression among creative practitioners of all kinds. However, discussions also voiced a necessary scepticism about outdoor walking as self-improvement, and, as Blake Morris puts it in his article for this issue, 'nature as a cure for "obsolete or corrupt society"'. Several talks reflected critically on these ideas along gender, disability and socio-economic lines, with Garry Mackenzie's contribution also reminding us that 'walking' genres such as travel writing can be 'either studiously apolitical or complicit in a hegemonic culture's consumption of resources'. Earlier this year, Mountaineering Scotland implied its complicity with the problematic Scottish land ownership situation by allying with the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to oppose the Scottish Government's plan to increase tree cover, claiming that 'wide open vistas' are crucial to pedestrian enjoyment of Scotland's terrain.⁴ In contrast, both historically and in the contemporary world walking has been a manifestation of human displacement and can, as such, represent the most extreme disempowerment.

In our early discussions about the conference, walking, and particularly its shared resonance across forms, genres, and disciplines, emerged as a natural theme because our respective research on Thomas A. Clark and Harriet Tarlo, among other 'radical' landscape poets, found us regularly dealing with poetics of walking. Both poets have spoken about the importance of walking to their practice, and both work and walk with visual artists. Influenced by Merleau-Ponty and

theories of perception, Tarlo often uses poetic form as a figure for embodied interactions with the environment, so that ‘walking poems’ reveal the process whereby walkers ‘enact’ their spatio-temporal field. For example, ‘steady yourself on a grass’, describes the experience of a walker (and an implied companion) during an August walk on Meal Hill, in rural West Yorkshire, who is at times either implicitly or explicitly aware of the relationship between her perceptual faculties, her moving body and the world she encounters.⁵ The poem’s form realises the walker’s movement through the landscape, and her evolving awareness that movement provides opportunities to expand her perception, not only because it entails changes in bodily perspective, but also because it exercises her perceptual intentionality. The spatial arrangement includes clusters of text which evoke the distances of her spatial field: over here is the movement of a bird, over there a foxglove; here a young boy singing, and there a group of bikers. The walker is momentarily occupied by these things, taking note of sensory qualities such as an object’s ‘shining’ and ‘blurred’ edge, or the sound of ‘plashy donkey steps’. As Robin Jarvis explains,

The pedestrian’s experience of landscape is a participatory rather than disinterested one: s/he is in constant sensuous contact with the environment and is entirely responsible via voluntary movements of the limbs for what s/he perceives of the (natural) surroundings. The achievement of any ‘view’, or any final or intermediate destination, is inseparable from the physical exertion it required.⁶

A ‘moderate pace’ enabling ‘intimate sensory contact with the environment’, walking provides Tarlo with a form in which to represent a becoming aware of ‘the multiplicity of appearances and the particularity of [the] actual landscape’.⁷ Indeed, as an activity which is explicitly enabled and constrained by the body, walking is, Jarvis claims, ‘capable of fostering resistance to any idealising aesthetic tendencies the traveller may start out with, and of countering the generalising and abstracting mentality inherent in all travel’ – an idea which Tarlo echoes through the representation of unsynthesised experience as word-clusters dispersed across the page.⁸

These word clusters emerge into view as the eye moves down the page – the eye must search, as the pagination is not typical, does not guide the reader as one might expect. In this respect, Tarlo’s poetry can be read in relation to philosopher Alva Noë’s understanding of the ‘disclosure’ and ‘recession’ of objects under focus. Noë’s focus is on embodied perception, but there are important parallels, as has been noted, with the process of perceiving innovative form in poetry. Noë describes the process of perceiving as being the process of bringing certain objects in a landscape to the fore:

I direct my gaze upon a sector of the landscape, which come to life and is disclosed, while the other objects recede into the periphery and become dormant, while, however, not ceasing to be there. [...] In other words to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it.⁹

Noë understands attention as a form of habitation: to look at an object is to inhabit it. This habitation does not, of course, occur bodily, but rather perceptually. Perception occupies the perceived object and, by extension, animates it from its ‘dormant’ state. This is an interesting view, and one which can be found within Tarlo’s poem. For example, the ‘once you’re eye’s in’, whilst a common phrase, here gives the impression of solidity, the idea that the eye goes on to occupy, to be ‘in’, the gorse flowers. The eye occupies and animates the gorse flower, and as Tarlo’s attention is called toward it, so is that of the reader. When this happens, the lineation of the page allows the earlier stanzas, and indeed pages of the work, to become ‘dormant’, to disappear from the reader’s view. Whatever the object in focus happens to be, it can be grappled with, and explored.

Whilst Tarlo's poetry can be usefully read in light of Noë, there are other ways through which perception as an animating force is depicted in nature writing. For example, Rebecca Solnit writes that walking is 'one way of maintaining a bulwark against [...]erosion of the mind, the body, the landscape, and the city'.¹⁰ This statement suggests that rather than ascribe to Noë's theory that attention occupies and animates its object, Solnit suggests that walking, which brings these objects into view, is a cohesive force, that allows boundaries to be reinforced between self and landscape. Indeed, Solnit suggests that without walking, these boundaries 'erode' – an intermingling, a breaking down of these boundaries. For Solnit, then, embodied perception can be understood as restorative to a sense of self. Solnit seeks to understand the embodied self as 'a source of action and production' in order to combat what she perceives as the shortcomings in the post-modern conception of the self. She claims that walking restores animation and autonomy to what has become a 'passive body for which sexuality and biological function are the only signs of life'.¹¹ By doing this, Solnit seeks to remind readers that the walking body is the most widely experienced, rather than this passive body, which she believes to be 'the white-collar urban body, or rather a theoretical body' which only ever experiences 'minor physical exertions'.¹² So Solnit seeks to rehabilitate the walking body as a common body, and to rehabilitate embodied perception whilst simultaneously rehabilitating walking as an unrarified, nonspecialist skill – simply, something that occurs. It is the ease and universality (of course, with exceptions) of walking that Solnit focuses on, and in doing so, reveals the extraordinary that lies within the ordinary act of walking.

Thomas A. Clark's relationship with walking marks his entire career. Indeed, Clark has described all of his published collections as walks, the variegated pace and pagination of the poems reflecting the movement of the feet along a trail, pausing to look, then moving on again. Indeed, Clark's walking is primarily a mode of transportation of the perceiving senses. In opposition to Tarlo's momentary attention, Clark's work espouses a deeper noticing. Arguably, the majority of Clark's poems attend primarily to the moment of intense engagement with a minute aspect of the natural world, rather than the steps required to bring the reader to that place. Popular criticism of Clark has very much focused on the bipedal in his work, however, and this is not entirely without cause. Perhaps Clark's best-known work is his 1998 manifesto-work, *In Praise of Walking*, which we offered as prompt to conference participants. Republished in several formats, and anthologised, this long work espouses the joys of walking, meditating particularly on the relationship between the eyes and the feet, the road and the horizon. Clark's walking is not urban bustling, nor is it the steady pace of a munroe-bagger: rather, Clark's walking is conceptualised as leisure time, primarily reflective in nature. His walks never lead anywhere particular, and his interest lies with incidental encounter.

This attitude toward walking is taken in part from the meditative walking tradition of classical Zen Buddhism, as exemplified in Basho's seminal poetic travelogue, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. An admixture of haiku and linking prose passages, *The Narrow Road* recounts Basho's walking pilgrimage around remote religious sites in the north of Japan. This walking is the result of a deep desire, a feeling not associated with exercise or destination, but with a desire for ambulatory wandering. Basho compares this impulse to that of a cloud suggesting that not only is the desire without particular direction, but that the desire itself is connective, linking Basho to the natural world around him:

'I myself have been tempted for a long time by the cloud-moving wind – filled with a strong desire to wander.'¹³

This desire treads through all things: blowing grass, scudding clouds. As such, Basho opens himself up to experiencing a de-anthropocentred form of walking, where the human moving through landscape is of no more note than the non-human. Clark translates this non-hierarchical

walking into his own practice. Rather than haiku, however, Clark employs a minimalist, aphoristic poetry, with emphasis on single-images, and detailed environmental construction at the level of the phoneme.

One excellent example of this phonemic grouping is identified by Tom Jones, who isolates the 'st' phoneme prevalent in Clark's *Craig Liath* (2003) and these groups of phonemes '[encourage] attentiveness to an environment at the same time as making an environment that the reader can inhabit'.¹⁴ Because many of these phonemes are silent in the poem, Jones locates these phonemic groups as 'a visual pattern'.¹⁵ The visual patterns create means of forming and reading the landscape for its ethical content, for the content that lies beyond its referential function. Clark understands the ethics inherent in regarding the world with wonder as being connected to the idea of giving, of reality constantly making itself apparent 'immediate or there all at once', and he comments on this attitude having shaped the 'extreme minimalism' of many of his works.

Phonemic grouping and other formal aspects of style are central to understanding Clark's belief in the poem as a propaedeutic device to develop the requisite skill of looking. Clark actively develops, through his writing, habits of attending closely to environment, producing works that demonstrate a belief that the attention paid to the natural world while walking can be re-enacted in the attention paid to a walker's poetic account. This belief is evidenced also in Thoreau's nature journals, where, Sharon Cameron believes, Thoreau's 'attendance to the landscape [...] is an effort to read it' and thus also to write it, to transfer that close attention from the natural world to the text.¹⁶ The text, then, must be taken seriously as an environment, and must also be read not as mimetic, as in Romantic nature poetry, but as gestural. The two environments, textual and natural cannot be mapped one to another. Rather, one is demonstrative of the types of attention, the types of observable moments of interest, that the other one requires and produces. This practice of creating the poetic environment, through what Ken Hiltner refers to as the 'gestural mode', is important because it makes secondary the particulars of environmental immersion. This is vital from both a poetic and a conservation point of view. Visitors flock to Thoreau's pond: they do not flock to Clark's unnamed hills, nor can they find Tarlo's bilberries. This preserves the landscape, encouraging readers to immerse themselves in local landscape, to find their own beauty and interest, rather than drawing them to ecologically fragile tourist attractions. Additionally, this technique is useful for reshaping walking, in line with what might be called 'The New Walking', an informal movement that was apparent at the Traversing the Field Conference.

The New Walking decentralises the able-bodied act of walking from appreciation of nature. More than this, it moves narratives of nature appreciation away from the post-Romantic boom in summiting and rock climbing that favoured ever more daring feats of ascension. By removing the peak as a goal of walking in nature, the New Walking democratises walking in a way that encourages the legitimacy of different bodily presences in nature. In particular, The New Walking attempts to decentralise the able-bodied male of narratives of walking. One keen proponent of this movement is Alec Finlay, whose experience with illness prompted him to reconsider ways of being in nature. Resting, lying down, turning back, circling a mountain rather than ascending it: all of these have become increasingly legitimate modes of apprehension. One of the means by which Finlay achieves this is through his practice of word mountains ('word-mntns'). These are wooden blocks, much like a child's building blocks, onto which letters are carved. They stack up, revealing the name of the mountain, and giving a rudimentary approximation of its structure. They are scaleable mountains, small in structure, and moreover, they can be rearranged: the imposing hill can become a nonsense-word, or other meanings can be found.

Finlay states, on the subject of The New Walking, that:

I have explored the river walk as one of the defining concepts of what I, teasingly, call The New Walking. A model for this is the naturalist William MacGillivray, who, in his writings on Upper Deeside published 1850, suggested the botanically minded should walk alongside a river to its source, making digressions, using the returning journey to carry out closer inspections of objects of interest. The learning comes in the to-and-fro, in the tasty details of ramsons, sorrels and water-mint, which slow the walk down.¹⁷

Both Tarlo and Clark are drawn to these ‘tasty details’ which, far from slowing down the walker, become the focal point of the walk, the fabric of experience replacing the hurried striving toward a goal. By embracing the ‘to-and-fro’, the New Walking allows a growing understanding of what it means to exercise embodied perception, and widens ‘permission’ by altering what constitutes a ‘walk’ and therefore, who can walk in the wilderness. As demonstrated by the New Walking, critical engagement with walking has emerged alongside a focus on embodiment in the environmental and cognitive humanities. Broadly, interest in walking speaks of an ever-growing sense that knowledge is ‘situated’, in Donna Haraway’s terms, or in other words that the bodies we are play a key role in the research, poems and artworks we generate.

Andrew Jeffrey, whose poems feature in this issue, has developed an experimental and embodied open-field poetics which engages eloquently and sometimes humorously with the theme of walking across boundaries. Navigating the border town of Berwick-upon-Tweed in the context of the Scottish Independence Referendum, Jeffrey addresses the connections and disconnections performed by bridges and ramparts, implying a satirical stance towards the heritage industries, and evoking failures of walking in poems such as ‘Breakyneck Steps’. In ‘Writing cross-country: landscapes, palimpsests and the problems of Scottish literary tourism’, Garry MacKenzie similarly confronts the role of literary heritage in preconditioning responses to the Scottish landscape. A rich palimpsest of literary journeys makes the encounter with much of the Scottish landscape an intertextual one. ‘[P]redicating a particular aesthetic response’, literary travel guides risk contributing to what Baudrillard described as a sense of hyperreality, which Mackenzie examines with reference to Louis MacNeice’s confession of disappointment with the Hebrides in *I Crossed the Minch*. This illuminates MacKenzie’s own attempt to produce a travel guide for Scotland which emphasises the experiential, sensory, rather than aestheticized, hyperreal aspects of the landscape.

With a similar concern for the ethics of representation, Helen List offers close readings of short films by Scottish modernist filmmakers, Jenny Gilbertson and Margaret Tait, both of whom were prodigious walkers, yet who struggled with the representation of walking in their medium. In ‘Walking within Film: Gilbertson and Tait and Insignificant Steps within Landscape’, List examines their attempts to do justice to Island life and landscape, yet also points out how the handheld camera constrains the camerawoman’s capacity to represent her own walking, resulting in an evasion of accountability for her presence in the landscape. This moves List to provide a Deleuzian account of the ‘action-image’, and its affective and ethical implications for spectators of Island cultures under pressure in the 1930s. Complementing this fascinating appraisal of the work of women filmmakers, Blake Morris discusses the feminist and collective potential of walking as performance, in ‘The Walking Library: Relating the Landscape’. According to Morris, Deirdre Heddon and Misha Myers’ ongoing Walking Library project focalises the relational aspects of walking, thereby challenging the Romantic tradition of the solitary, male walker. By staging multiple walks in distant locations, rerouting and retracing past walks, for example from Carbeth Huts to Glasgow’s Walled Garden, Heddon and Myers also emphasise the ‘global potential of their local actions’. Walking with companions – both human and textual – gives rise to a sense of both experience and space as co-constituted; and importantly, the autobiobiographic methodology underpinning the project allows all participants to play an active role in this dynamic.

From well-trodden routes across the Central Belt, the Highlands and Islands, to the less well-trodden and even un-treadable miles of coastline around the British and Irish Archipelago, David Gange shows how water-based modes of travel and navigation – namely kayaking – might complement walking to help create a fuller historiography of the country. In his article, ‘Retracing Trevelyan? Historical Practice and the Archive of the Feet’, Gange looks back to Carlyle and George Macaulay Trevelyan’s deployment of affective, subversive acts of walking, deriving from them the potential for ‘activating historical sympathies’ for the Scottish landscape and those who have dwelt in it. He also situates history’s current ‘identity crisis’ in relation to the recent ‘material turn’, asking what his discipline’s contribution might be to ecological and posthumanist thinking. Gange is not alone in this: all the disciplines, genres and modes represented here (poetry, travel writing, history, performance, and film) engage to a large extent with the question of how walking can enhance their responsiveness to the world. Walking as theme, but also as praxis, unites the articles in this issue, and indicates the major concerns of the Traversing the Field conference.

¹ Rob Gibbons, Neil Gibbons and Steve Coogan, *Alan Partridge: Nomad* (London: Trapeze, 2016), pp. 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Frances Perraudin, ‘Scottish gamekeepers and mountaineers oppose tree-planting plan’, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/15/scottish-governments-forestry-strategy-called-into-question>> [accessed 3 October 2017]

⁵ Harriet Tarlo, ‘steady yourself on a grass’, in *The Ground Aslant* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 140-43.

⁶ Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Alva Noë, and Evan Thompson, *Vision and Mind: Selected Readings in the Philosophy of Perception*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002), p. 24.

¹⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹³ Matuso Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and other travel sketches* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 24.

¹⁴ Tom Jones, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh, EUP, 2012), p. 165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁶ Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), p. 12.

¹⁷ Alec Finlay, ‘The Watershed’, Online resource < <http://alecfinlayblog.blogspot.co.uk/2017/07/the-watershed.html>> [accessed 1 September 2017].